

On the Airwaves, Contras Gain Ground

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NUEVA GUINEA, Nicaragua, March 8 — In rural Nicaragua, where radio is what ties people to the outside world, a new station at the far right of the AM dial is causing a quiet sensation.

The station offers a programming mix aimed at the broadest possible appeal. Informative news and sports reports from Managua and around the world are mixed with an upbeat combination of American rock music and salsa hits.

Broadcasters include several who are well known to generations of Nicaraguan listeners, and a new episode of the long-running Pancho Madrigal soap opera is broadcast every night.

Sophisticated, freewheeling and irreverent, the new station is not subject to Government censorship, as is every other news outlet in Nicaragua.

It is not a normal station at all, but the newly unveiled voice of the Nicaraguan rebels, the contras.

"We report what the Sandinista Government covers up," is the station's slogan.

After more than a year of planning, the station, called Liberation Radio, began broadcasting in mid-January. Here in the contested central part of Nicaragua, as well as in northern and western provinces, the station comes in clearly, and many people are listening. The capital, Managua, is one of the few parts of the country where the station is difficult to hear.

"Without a doubt, the radio has already had an impact," said a foreigner who lives in Juigalpa, the largest town in this part of Nicaragua.

Even some Sandinista officials in this area, where there is strong anti-Government sentiment, admit they listen.

Until now, the only contra radio operation has been the Sept. 15 Radio, which is highly amateurish compared with the new station. It broadcasts only on shortwave, which most Nicaraguans cannot pick up, and its programming includes one-sided battle reports and anti-Sandinista tirades that have hurt its credibility.

According to diplomats, specialists from the Central Intelligence Agency helped design Liberation Radio. The United States finances the station from the money Congress allocated to the contras last year.

"Our idea is to reach a broad audience," said Marta Sacasa, a spokeswoman for the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the contra coalition, which runs Liberation Radio. "There are programs for every social class, and we try to go easy on political propaganda."

The site of the radio's transmitter

is secret; Ms. Sacasa would say only that it is "somewhere in Central America."

The Sandinista Government has made no official comment about the new station. But the Interior Ministry stepped in to forbid foreign correspondents in Managua from hiring someone to monitor its broadcasts and distribute copies to news offices.

The roadcast last Saturday night over Liberation Radio, which was monitored in Nueva Guinea, demonstrated why the station has become so popular.

News reports showed full understanding of up-to-the-minute political developments in the country. There were straightforward items about activities of opposition parties and reports of roadblocks recently set up by Government inspectors seeking to halt illegal transport of food and other products.

Anti-Sandinista statements made by Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega from exile in Miami were also featured.

No Excessive Bias

The news was presented without excessive bias, and the short, pulsating musical interludes between each item are just what Nicaraguan listeners are used to hearing.

The evening sports report, which featured a preview of the Mike Tyson-James (Bonecrusher) Smith heavyweight title fight Saturday, which Tyson won, and an account of Roger Clemens's contract dispute with the Boston Red Sox was read by Evelio Areas Mendoza, a veteran sportscaster whose authoritative baritone is well known in Nicaragua from prerevolutionary days.

Mr. Areas closed his report with the reminder, "Sports are better in freedom." It was apparently a riposte to the sign-off Sandinista sportscasters use, "Sports are the people's right."

Radio news programs broadcast from Managua must be licensed by the Government. An office of the Interior Ministry monitors and tapes each program, and reporters must limit their coverage to conform to official guidelines.

News Programs Halted

Soon after the Sandinistas took power, they closed more than 20 radio news programs. Many of those who lost their broadcasting and producing jobs later left the country and have been recruited by Liberation Radio.

The station obviously makes an effort at restraint, but sometimes enthusiasm seems to get the better of credibility.

One item broadcast Saturday was a factual report of new reductions in rice and bean rations just announced by the Government. After reading it, the announcer added that in many

Nicaraguan homes "people have no alternative but to rely on drinking water to stave off hunger."

Perhaps the most inspired idea of the station's founders was to create a contra version of the enormously popular Pancho Madrigal serial, about a peasant's small triumphs over the vicissitudes of life. Pancho Madrigal still appears on a Managua station, but some of the original voices belong to Nicaraguans who have gone into exile and now appear on Liberation Radio.